

Luke 14:15–23: Temporal and Eschatological Implications of Evangelistic Hospitality

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The parable of the great supper in Luke 14:15-23 has both temporal and eschatological implications. That is, Jesus uses the parable to indicate God’s desire that His servants invite people to His eternal kingdom, but also that His servants invite people to the gathering of the saints on earth. Thus, the parable provides both a paradigm for understanding the soteriological relationship between Israel and the church, and also an imperative for practicing evangelistic hospitality. This article will situate the parable in its Lukan context and the context of the immediate pericope and will interpret the parable in terms of its eschatological and evangelistic emphases. The author will argue that the eschatological implications of the parable should not overshadow its temporal imperative to practice evangelistic hospitality.

Authorship

Darrel Bock traces the history of the authorship tradition of Luke from the Bodmer papyri XIV, dated around 200 CE, to the Middle Ages. The early and medieval church identified Luke as the purported author of Luke–Acts. Bock concludes that “the absence of any dispute about the claim of authorship across several early centuries is a strong reason to take the tradition seriously.”¹ James R. Edwards dates the Gospel of Mark at about 65 CE and writes, “The Third Gospel must have been written later than that date, but how much later cannot be said

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke–Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 33.

with any degree of certainty.”² The author assumes Lukan authorship in the second half of the first century CE.

Context

James Edwards notes that Luke has a penchant for describing contrasting pairs, and situates the parable of the great supper in the context of two parables following Luke’s account of Jesus healing a man with edema at a Sabbath meal at the home of a “leading Pharisee” in Luke 14:1–6.³ Following this healing miracle, Jesus taught about humility (Luk 14:7–11) and instructed that people should extend hospitality to the “poor, maimed, lame, or blind” (14:13). Hearing this, one of the guests at the banquet made a judgment about the blessedness of those who enjoy God’s eschatological supper in the kingdom of God (14:14). Luke frequently used anonymous interjections to frame theological questions without shifting the emphasis of the narrative.⁴ The guest’s observation shifts the focus from humility and hospitality to soteriology and eschatology. Jesus used this opportunity to tell the parable under present scrutiny.

Luke’s parable shares similar content with Matt 22:1–14, but several significant differences exist between the two parables. In Matthew’s account, those invited to the banquet do not simply reject the king’s invitation, but many of them kill the king’s messengers. In response, the king slaughters them and razes their cities. When the king finally holds the banquet, the king ties a guest hand and foot and casts him into outer darkness for not wearing wedding clothes. Matthew’s account of the parable is the third in a series of parables told as a riposte to a challenge issued by the “chief priests and elders” in Matt 21:23. The parable of the two sons and the parable of the wicked tenants precede this one. In each of these parables, Jesus communicates that many who believe themselves to be in the

² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 11.

³ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 415.

⁴ See Lk 11:27, 45; 12:13; 13:1, 23, 31.

kingdom, or to be sons of God, are not. These will find themselves separated from God at the judgment. Thus, the parables have an eschatological emphasis.

Jesus's parable in Luke 14:15–24 also shares a similar setting with Matt 22:1–14 but emphasizes not the judgment of God but the great grace of God in extending his invitation to the unworthy. Matthew's account of the parable aims at people who think they are in the kingdom and need no invitation; Luke's version addresses those who are perceived as unworthy- "poor, maimed, lame, or blind"- but are nevertheless invited.

Genre

The passage under scrutiny is a parable contained within a Gospel. Specifically, it is a monarchical parable which revolves around a sovereign: a father, master, or king who "judges between two contrasting subordinates."⁵ Unlike simile parables which draw comparisons between the kingdom of heaven and some simulacra within the realm of human experience, often with the preface "the kingdom of heaven is like...", the parable under present scrutiny presents a conceit- an extended, enacted metaphor.⁶ Jesus's use of a feast as a metaphor for the kingdom of God has precedent. Robert Stein notes that "Within Judaism and later Christianity, the metaphor of a banquet or supper was frequently used to portray the bliss of the age to come."⁷ George Beasley-Murray concurs, citing the "long-standing symbol of the kingdom of God as a feast."⁸ Thus, the setting of the narrative provides the context of the parable (a banquet in the home of a powerful man) and reflects the tradition of comparing the kingdom of God to a feast. Jesus

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, "Interpreting the Parables of Jesus: Where Are We and Where Do We Go from Here?" *CBQ* 53 (1991): 60.

⁶ For example, see Matt 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47.

⁷ Robert H. Stein, *Introduction to Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 85–86.

⁸ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 120.

disrupts the conventional understanding of the heavenly feast by reversing the priority of the guest list: those invited will refuse to attend, and those least expected will feel compelled to come in.

Exegesis

The parable has a straightforward narrative structure. A man invited people to a banquet on a set date. The date arrived, and the king sent a messenger to retrieve them. They each refuse, offering implausible excuses, such as having bought oxen they have not tested or buying fields they have not seen. The reference to recent marriage may be a humorous interlude. Verse 21 records the master's response, which contains the theological significance of the parable: the master expressed anger at those who refused his invitation and extended his invitation in turn to those not previously invited: the "poor, maimed, blind, and lame." This list of handicaps mirrors that of verse 13, connecting Jesus's previous teaching on hospitality with his current parable. Thus, both temporal and eschatological implications are intended. The master invited the masses, yet the house remained unfilled. The master sent the servant to both the "streets and alleys" and the "highways and lanes" to "make them come in, so that my house may be filled" (Luke 14:23). Thus, those close at hand and those who are isolated from the master's house are invited.

Some scholars have interpreted the parable allegorically, assigning three classes of people to the three invitations: the first to righteous Jews, the second to Jews generally, and the third to gentiles.⁹ The invited guests who refuse the invitation are assumed to represent those Jews who think themselves righteous because of their law-keeping. The second group—those in the "streets and alleys" are the Jewish people broadly speaking. They are in close proximity to the kingdom. The third

⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, X-XXIV*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1053.

group, those who of the “highways and lanes” are thought to be gentiles who were isolated from the kingdom of God, but are invited through Jesus’ ministry. Such interpretation aligns with Acts 13:46, in which Paul and Barnabas understand that Jewish rejection of the gospel opens the door to gentile evangelization. However, the text does not require such an interpretation, nor does acceptance of this interpretation ultimately affect the significance of this passage for the present purpose. However, an allegorical interpretation shifts the emphasis from the master to the guests. In the present parable, the master is the primary actor, and thus, the subject of the parable. For contrast, one might consider the parable of the soils in Matt 13:3-9. In this parable, the human subject is the farmer who sowed the seed, but the primary action occurs within the soils in which the seed is sown. Thus, the parable is about the soils, not the farmer, as Jesus indicates in Matt 13:18-24. In the present parable, the action is shared by the master and the servant; thus, the parable is about the invitational desire of the master, enacted by the servant.

If the parable shows the eschatological feast in the kingdom of God, then a focus on the disposition of the master proves more important than the presence of the guests. Jesus portrays the master as having “invited many” and as taking offense at those who refuse to come. After people have rejected him, the master sends his servant to the “streets and alleys of the city” to find those in close proximity. That done, the master extends the invitation to more remote and rural regions. The master states the reason for the comprehensive invitation: “that my house may be filled” (14:23). Thus, the theological import of the parable is found in God’s desire to fill His house. The parable is clearly eschatological, as is the anonymous interjection which prompted it (14:15). However, the repetition of four handicaps in verses 13 and 21 connects Jesus’s eschatological message in the parable with his teaching about hospitality in the present age. Thus, one may conclude that God wants not only his kingdom filled but also his temporal house filled. The church can easily see itself as the servant in the parable, God as the

master, and the world as those invited after the initial invitation. Darrel Bock similarly connects the current church age to the eschatological nature of the parable: “the table is already open for visitors. Jesus' current kingdom offer is in view here, an offer that culminates in the meal of God's blessing (14:24).”¹⁰ Thus it is appropriate to interpret the parable in both its eschatological and temporal dimensions.

Key Ideas of the Text

The text clearly has eschatological overtones. The eschatological emphasis does not negate a temporal reading of the parable because of biblical teaching that one's fate in eternity relates to one's temporal faith and behavior. The single, over-arching idea of the text conveys that the master desires to gather people for his banquet, i.e., that God desires to gather people to Himself, both in this world and in the next.

There are three categories of character in the parable: the host, the servant, and the guests. Jesus focuses on the host who continually invites, and on the guests—both those who accept and those who reject the invitation. The third category of character, the servant, serves as the intermediary between the will of the master and the actions of the guests. The master desires to fill his house, but he does not go and knock on doors. Rather, he sends his servants to invite others to fill his house. This corresponds with Rom 10:14–15, which places those sent into a similar intermediary position between God and humanity.

Theological Implications

In contrast to Matthew's version of the parable, Luke's account focuses on the great grace and hospitality of the master. The parable empowers believers to look upon those outside as objects of God's grace and invitation. The parable describes the

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT 3B, ed. Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 127.

guests as socially unacceptable for the occasion described. They are “poor, maimed, blind, and lame” (14:21). Each of these people represents a diminished quality that reduces human agency and alienates one from others. Christians can see the lost—spiritually poor, morally maimed, blind to the ways of God, and paralyzed in relation to him—as those most in need of invitation to his feast.

Sources

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